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ABSTRACT

In the last decade the availability of undergraduate field experience courses for psychology majors has significantly increased, but limited information concerning the effect these courses have on students has been reported. The post-graduation placement of students who completed a field experience during a five-year period were compared to placements of non-participating psychology major graduates. The field experience students were found to enter related graduate training and employment at a significantly greater percentage than students who were not involved in field work. Field experience students entered a wider range of human service programs than non-field experience students. In general, students who completed the field practicum rated their undergraduate education as being relevant and helpful in formulating future career goals. (Author)

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Undergraduate Participants in Field Experience Practica: Post-Graduation Follow-up

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Paper presented at the American Psychological Association 88th Annual Convention, Montreal, September, 1980.

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Introduction

The student majoring in psychology at the undergraduate level is increasingly being found volunteering his or her time at mental health facilities as a means to earn academic credit. The students, functioning as milieu staff, assist the full-time professionals in the implementation of programs and in the monitoring of clients' needs. The volunteered time earns the student academic credit toward the undergraduate degree in psychology. Over the last few years traditional undergraduate programs in psychology have demonstrated a significant trend in encouraging and providing field experiences for students before graduation. These courses typically are electives selected by the students during their third and fourth year of course work. At the university level, one of the reasons for the increased availability of field experience courses reported by Creek and Thompson (1977) is the student demand for relevancy in the course of study. Matthews (1979) in a recent survey of college psychology departments found a majority of them offering field experience opportunities for students. Field experiences have dramatically increased at the community college level. Students are trained as mental health technical workers receiving an associate of arts degree upon completion of field work (Becker, 1978).

In addition to student demand for practical experiences, Coffrey, Berger, Marx, and Senn (1977) stated that academic psychologists support

the implementation of this course work and encourage students to become involved in field work as undergraduates. The field experience is perceived as a way for students to learn more about their own selves as they provide a needed service to understaffed cooperating agencies. Besides the encouragement from the academic field, mental health care facilities have sought psychology practicum students as a means to supplement professional staff and to support an identity as a training institution. The overall result has been a significant increase in the number of students working in mental health facilities as they assume many of the responsibilities previously held only by full-time professional staff.

The author of this paper has been supervising field experience students for five years and this paper examines the participating student after graduation. Although the field work opportunities have increased dramatically, there is limited information concerning the effects the experience has on students after receiving their undergraduate degree in psychology. Among the questions currently unanswered include: Does field experience direct more students to graduate training? Do these students prefer jobs in the human services? Are they more successful than other students in securing applied jobs? Do they have a better understanding of the diversity of opportunities in the human services? These are only some of the factors needing review concerning the effects of field experience on undergraduates and this paper attempts to examine some of them.

METHOD

Subjects and Procedure

This paper reports on students who during the past five years participated in a field experience practica at one university. The university is a

medium sized school located in the Chicago metropolitan area. The field experience program is an elective course which can be selected by psychology majors in the junior or senior year of study. The vast majority of students select the course in their senior year. The students are required to work in a mental health/human service agency a minimum of nine hours per week during the semester to earn three hours of academic credit.

During the past five years ninety-six students completed the field experience course (56 males, 40 females). The average age of the students during participation was 21.2 years. Information concerning the students' placement after graduation was gathered.

No typical field experience can be described for these students as the placements and nature of services provided varied for the students over the five year time span. But the common factors shared by the student include: 1) they all experienced direct service contact with some clinical group evidencing psychological, emotional, or intellectual handicaps and 2) all students attended weekly seminars at the academic institution allowing for a sharing of experiences.

RESULTS

Of the total number of students who completed the field experience for the five year period examined, 96% of these students (N = 92) entered employment or advanced education related to the human services after graduation. Of the four students who did not enter allied fields, three entered law school and the fourth developed a serious illness precluding employment or advanced study. This figure of 96% is significantly greater when compared to all psychology majors who graduated during this period at the university. Only 39% of the non-participating majors secured social service employment

or continued their education in an allied area. Of this group 11% went on to graduate school and 28% entered social service employment.

The field experience students entered graduate and professional schools in significantly greater number than did general majors. Approximately one-half of the participants continued in graduate school or a psychology professional school. An interesting difference between the field experience students and non-participants was in the former's choice of graduate training. The field experience students were accepted at and entered a wider range of human service related programs than did other students. The field experience students entered advanced training programs in such fields as school psychology, social work, community mental health, and Psy. D. programs in addition to clinical and counseling programs. The non-field experience students focused on traditional clinical or experimental programs. Those accepted to clinical programs were in master level programs.

Diversity was also found in the applied jobs secured by the students who participated in field experience. Many were able to enter employment at the facility where their field experience was completed. Apparently the agencies which hire field experience students view these practica as an opporutnity to observe potential staff without committing themselves for employment. This appears to be a beneficial arrangement for both agency and student. The students who gained employment usually began with a higher salary because of the field experience and adapted to their new role as staff member easily.

In general the students who completed the field practicum rated their undergraduate education as being relevant and helpful to them in formulating future career goals. These participating students apparently were able to

see the potentials and limitations of employment in the human service field on a first hand basis and utilize this information to their benefit.

CONCLUSIONS

The survey of graduating psychology majors indicated significant differences between students who completed a field experience and those who did not elect this option. The former group entered related employment and advanced training in greater percentages than did the latter group. A wider breadth of training situations and employments were chosen by the field experience students who found the practica as helping them select and formulate career goals. These findings would support many of the reasons used to support the creation of field experience courses for undergraduates. The students appeared to develop a more realistic and practical view of the human services and what their undergraduate training prepares them for in the future. Caution must be taken in interpreting the results in terms of cause and effect and many of the questions examined in this paper require further and more detailed study.

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